

The Upper Crust Of Seafood



Crab: fresh from the ocean

Crab, prawn and squid are popular seafood dishes in Sri Lanka bought at the wholesale market in Negombo and cooked in many ways.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

Via the airport expressway, Negombo's *lellama* is only 20 minutes drive from Colombo. Negombo is Sri Lanka's fishing entrepot, the fishing capital where all fish carriers meet at one central port of call. Here fish are received, repacked, redistributed and transhipped to various lucrative markets. Here is where agents representing hotels and syndicates and wholesalers, called fish *mudalalis*, attend religiously before dawn every day.

Even before the sun has thought of waking up fishermen turn their boats homeward. Throughout the night they laid their 250m by 4m wide nets on the lagoon floor. They scattered morsels of fish, worms and algae upon them to lure their prey from its watery holes. With their nets rolled up with the catch and their tasks done, it is time to dock at the market jetty.

Elsewhere in the same lagoon but nearer land, men with kerosene lamps wade back to step ashore. They too have finished their work. In their baskets jiggles their catch of the night; lagoon trophies they have scooped with bare hands in shallow waters.

At the same time, from over a hundred miles away, lorries are hurtling down the highways to reach the same destination at the appointed hour. They are coming from Jaffna, Mannar, Mullaitivu, Kalpitiya and Kokuvil. The lorries are packed with live marine treasure netted only a few hours before from Sri Lanka's rich fishing grounds.

The lagoon boats and the northern lorries are bringing in crab and prawns. The boats at sea are returning with shoals of fish that include squid and cuttlefish. Here is the bounty of the lagoon and the gifts of the sea.

The crab, prawns and squid supplies come in three waves in the last watch of the night. For the men in their boats and for the truckers at their steering wheels, the deadlines they must meet are driven by the winds of market forces.

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The first wave which hits land around 4am bringing prized giant crab and jumbo prawns from the Jaffna lagoon. After the necessary quality surveys have been done, the seafood is quickly snapped up by the agents of the hotel trade. The deals are done in an instant and the cargo disappears out of sight on its way to Colombo's five star hotels and top notch restaurants.

The second wave reaches the fishing hub at 5am and when the boats come in, the scramble starts. Unlike the first wave, cargo that was dispatched without much ado, the second supply wave is fought for, tooth and nail. Haggling goes on, colourful words are exchanged, charmingly apt idioms are pronounced, voices rise in pitch and volume, but beneath it all one senses that a spirit of bonhomie exists and governs the bargaining processes.

Shortly before 6am as the last watch of the night gives way to breaking dawn, the third wave arrives almost as an anti climax. Retail selling on the road and the market opposite has already begun. Nearby a crowd has gathered around an auctioneer calling for the highest bids for individual lots of fish. Others watch, interested to gauge the prices particular fish will raise. Thus will be adjudged the market price or rate that will prevail that day.

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Loaded with seafood, the lorries head towards Colombo's leading hotels and restaurants. Here the cargo is unloaded and the crab, prawn, squid and other fish will be taken straight to the kitchens. The prawn and fish will be put on ice and the live crabs will be kept in tanks until they are chosen later in the day or night when a customer orders a crab dish.

Preparing Seafood

Some cooks boil the crab in hot water, some use a sledgehammer to bash its head. In making, for example, a crab dish with garlic, olive oil is first poured into a pan which is then heated. Once it has reached the required temperature, a few pieces of garlic are added to it. The crab is then placed in the saucepan and cooked on a slow fire, which is gradually increased to boiling point. Shortly before that, chicken stock is added.

Thereafter the heat is suddenly increased to approximately 180⁰ C. After a few minutes at this heat, the temperature is lowered and the crab is allowed to simmer. Depending on the type of dish, it is sometimes served on a bed of rice and sometimes garnished.

A favourite crab dish generally made as a Sunday treat for the whole family to enjoy is crab curry. It can be turned into a full blown red curry with the generous use of chilli powder. Alternatively it can be made pepper hot with white or black pepper. But be warned. Crab is not for the finicky. It's a hands-on dish and you have to get your fingers dirty to thoroughly enjoy it. Or else, don't be crabwise. Walk the straight and narrow and go for the baked crab where crab meat is extracted and placed in the shell to tuck in with a fork.

A much prized source of crab is the Jaffna lagoon. Here they grow big and can weigh over three kilos during their 13 year life span. They have a distinct sweet taste and when properly cooked the meat has a 'melt in the mouth' tenderness. It is much sought after by crab connoisseurs.

To cook prawn, the jumbo prawn is first opened up and cleaned. Thereafter, it is placed in a dish containing hot olive oil with garlic or ginger or some other ingredient depending on the recipe. It is then allowed to cook on a slow fire during which other ingredients are added. The whole process takes only eight minutes; and the inviting prawn with garnishing or without is ready for the table.

Such is the enduring appeal of the prawn, even those who appreciate fine dining will gladly have a quick snack of the masses' affordable fast food, *Isso vadai*. Prepared in the shape of a cookie with a prawn on top, it is dipped into oil and deep fried till golden brown. It is available at carts on wheels, it is cheap, it gives an instant prawn fix and it is delicious. Especially, when the prawn is a large one fresh from the lagoon. These are the crustaceans of the deep and along with squid form the upper crust of the dining table.

The process of preparing squid begins with holding the skin and spreading it apart. This reveals the flesh, which is sliced into pieces and cleaned. The slices of squid are then marinated with salt and pepper, lime juice, custard powder and corn flour. A beaten egg is added. The squid is then dipped into boiling oil at 180⁰ C until it is golden brown. Karapincha leaves and red chilli pieces are added to the oil. A separate mixture of finely chopped onions, garlic, butter, salt and pepper is added to the wok and stir fried until golden brown. The cooked squid slices are then added to the pan and stir fried for a few minutes. Within a matter of 12 minutes the hot butter cuttlefish dish is ready to be served!

Photographs of crab and prawn dishes were taken at the Ministry of Crab. Photographs of the preparation of squid were taken at the Curry Leaf, Hilton Colombo

